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ABSTRACT

The assessment of current practices in college reading improvement courses offered by four-year, degree-granting public institutions in the Midwest was the focus of this survey. Undertaken to determine the availability of such courses and to identify current practices, materials and methods utilized, the survey tapped one hundred thirty-two institutions on such measures as length of course, director involvement, housing, evaluation criteria for reading ability, program goals, teaching and text materials used, areas considered in need of improvement, types of activities most valuable, and characteristics and competency levels of students. A summary of trends indicated by the survey is included and possible implications for future instructional approaches are outlined. (KS)

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A SURVEY OF CURRENT PRACTICES IN COLLEGE READING IMPROVEMENT COURSES OFFERED BY FOUR-YEAR, DEGREE-GRANTING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN THE MID-WEST

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Recent social and economic pressure upon many institutions of higher learning have resulted in what in actual practice is an "open admission" policy. Therefore, we find in the college setting students who are reading at the sixth reader level or even below. As a result, college has been under pressure to establish reading improvement courses.

A. Statement of Problem

This survey was undertaken for the following purposes:

1. To determine the degree to which reading improvement courses are available to public college and university students in the midwestern United States.

2. To identify current practices, materials, and methods utilized in such courses.

3. To identify (a) the strengths of such courses and (b) the weaknesses of such courses.

B. Significance of Problem

Reading improvement courses at the college level have proliferated during the past five years. It is generally agreed that college reading programs should be related to the specific reading problems of the students served. Therefore, it appeared desirable to explore the thinking and expectations of instructors working in such programs.

C. Procedures Employed

1. The first step the survey required was the identification of the institutions to which questionnaires would be submitted. A check of a list of the accredited degree-granting, four-year public colleges in fifteen state areas yielded the names of one hundred thirty-two institutions. (The fifteen states include: Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Tennessee, and Indiana).

2. Because the investigators wanted to obtain the requested information from the members of the staff who deal most directly with the college students, a letter was sent to the office of the president (or chancellor) of each of the 132 institutions requesting the following information:

> Does your institution offer any type of post-secondary reading opportunities (for personal improvement) to college students?
>
> If so, please list the name and campus address of the person working directly with such students, or the person charged with the responsibility for developing the program for the students.

A return of approximately 75% of replies to the original request has been obtained. Suitable follow-up letters attempted to solicit further replies without noteworthy success.

Of the 132 institutions first contacted replies from 105 were received. Fourteen of these replies indicated that no such courses were available to their students.

After processing information thus received, the investigators sent out a more extensive questionnaire to each person designated by a college administrator as being directly concerned with a reading program.

Complete replies to the questionnaire were eventually received from fifty-five of the ninety-one institutions to whom questionnaires were sent. These fifty-five institutions reported operating a total of sixty reading improvement courses. It should be noted here that a number of institutions did not reply even to a follow-up questionnaire. Such failure to reply is probably related to the nature of the program and the temporary nature of some faculty assignments for such programs. It is heartening to note, however, that replies were received from all of the major state universities and colleges in this geographical area and from the majority of the teacher preparation institutions. Those institutions not replying tended to be smaller technical institutions and regional campuses.

D. Presentation of Findings

In pursuit of the stated purposes of the survey, information was solicited in a number of areas. One general area had to do with credit status for such courses, course length, amount of faculty time devoted to such instruction, and the academic preparation of directors and instructors.

1.1 Course Credit

Two major related concerns were the granting of academic credit and the voluntary or required nature of the programs. The fifty-five institutions reported a total of sixty such programs in operation. (Obviously, some institutions had more than one type of program). Thirteen of the sixty courses were required with academic credit granted, while ten courses were required with no credit granted. Of those thirty-seven courses where the student could enroll on a voluntary basis, credit was granted in nineteen cases, while in eighteen cases, no credit was granted. It should be added here that in five of the ten cases where the course was required but no credit granted this resulted from a decision of the dean of students that certain identifiable groups of students, usually marginal entrants, needed the course.

It should also be added that at nine institutions where non-credit voluntary courses were offered, there were also required courses for which credit was granted.

It can be said that considerable diversity of practice exists with respect to requirements and the granting of credit, but a trend toward the granting of credit seemed to be clearly evident.

1.2 Length of Course

A second consideration in this general area of concern was with the length of the course, and with the manner in which such length was determined. For forty-eight of the sixty in the fifty-five institutions offering such programs students took the course for a semester, a quarter, or, in one case, eight weeks. Three programs offered opportunities to "test out" and nine programs required students to reach an agreed-upon proficiency level. In five institutions more than one option (specified time or proficiency level) was available.

It is apparent from this that forty-eight (eighty percent) of the programs followed the academic calendar. Since it was disclosed in 1.1 that credit was granted for thirty-two of the courses, and that ten of the non-credit courses were required, the conventional practice of defining the course by time attended does not come as a shock.

1.3 Actual Director Involvement in Course

It appears to be a common practice in many student-service programs at universities and colleges for the person designated as director not to be actively involved with students in the day-to-day operation of the program. The investigators considered it to be significant of actual involvement that the person in charge actually worked with the students. It was gratifying to receive replies indicating that in fifty-one of the fifty-five institutions the director actually worked with students. In fact, the following table indicates that in a fifth of the institutions, the director spent his complete load time working with students. However, in most cases, this appeared to indicate that the director was not a senior faculty member but rather an instructor especially employed for or assigned to this duty.

A tabulation of the percent of load time spent on the program by the directors follows:

Percent of Time Spent	Number of Institutions Reporting
0 - 20	8
21 - 40	13
41 - 60	7
61 - 80	4
100	11
Overload	1
No response or ambiguous reply	11
Total	55

Again no very clear pattern emerges, but since the institutions are in fact quite diverse in size and type of student enrollments, as well as in institutional goals, such diversity is predictable.

1.4 Academic Preparation of Instructors

At some institutions, one individual, a director, carried most of the instructional responsibilities; at others the teaching load was shared by a number of individuals with rather diverse amounts and types of academic preparation. The investigators believed that the level of the academic preparation of instructors, and their academic background could present some indications of (1) the degree of institituinal commitment to the program and (2) the likelihood that instructors would possess the skills and knowledge requisite to effective instruction. Therefore these two aspects were investigated.

Information received indicated that in the sixty programs at fifty-five institutions, a total of ninety persons participated in instruction, in varying amounts of time. Of these, twenty-three were either undergraduates (2) or holders of the BA degree. Seventeen were doctoral candidates (MA+). Nine were temporary faculty employed specifically to teach the course. Forty-one were full-time faculty and two were full time staff. (One will recall from 1.3 that for many individuals this was a part-time assignment.)

These figures certainly might be taken to indicate a wide range of dedication, maturity, and expertise on the part of instructional personnel and could be indicative of the importance attached to the program by the various college administrations.

Another question asked of the directors (who were in many cases partially or totally involved in the instruction) concerned the academic preparation of the instructors. Of the instructors reported, the following academic backgrounds were given.

Area of Preparation	Number of Individuals
English	34
Reading	41
Counseling and Guidance	27
Optometry	1
Elementary Reading	1
Seminar in Human Development Project	1
Other (unspecified)	1
Elementary Education Majors	1
Student Tutors	2
"graduate" studies	1
Educational Psychology	2
Total	112

It will be noticed that this total does not coincide completely with some previous totals. Some areas of overlap, with an instructor having training in several areas partially accounts for that. Further, the use of changing numbers of undergraduate and graduate students as tutors and instructors may have caused some discrepancy in the figures.

With respect to preparation in terms of academic background, what emerges is a relatively murky picture. While it would be rash to say that special training in reading would be either absolutely essential or sufficient, it is apparent that the duties were assigned to a variety of departments or centers and the composition of the teaching corps reflects this variety.

1.5 Housing of Reading Improvement Course

One factor which may make a difference in the operational effectiveness of such a program is the department or center in which it is housed. This factor might give the investigators a clue regarding impetus for and support of the program. Of the fifty-five institutions, the following breakdown applied.

Department Where Housed	Number of Individuals
Department or College of Education	10*
Counseling Services or Student Personnel Service	10
English	8
Cooperative between two departments	8
General Studies	6
Reading Department (specified)	5
Learning centers or learning development institutions	3
Adult Education	1
Not Specified	4

* Two were specified as elementary education.

There appears to be little uniformity in this pattern. While it justifies no hasty conclusions regarding the quality of the program, it may help to account for the diverse backgrounds of instructional personnel, and may also give some clues regarding the wide variety of instructional materials found to be in use.

2.0 Criteria of Acceptance of and Satisfaction with the Program

The investigators requested information concerning types of data tending to reflect the acceptance of the permanence, and the satisfaction with the program.

2.1 Years Offered

A record of the years offered may be of some slight consequence in judging a program. Its main usefulness is probably in giving some insight into related factors such as the degree of organization of the program, local development of materials, and presence of a permanent trained staff.

A table listing the number of years the program has been in operation follows.

Number of Years Offered	Number of Institutions
0 - 4	21
5 - 9	13
10-14	9
15-19	5
20+	7
Total	55

2.2 Size of Program

The investigators felt that it would be useful to know the size of such reading improvement programs in terms of the number of students served.

The following table summarizes the information received.

Average No. of Students (yearly)	Number of Institutions
Fewer than 50	11
50 - 100	6
101 - 300	24
over 300	17
	58*

2.3 Institutional Evaluations of the Program

Respondents were asked to tell results of evaluations of program effectiveness. Thirty-one of fifty-five schools

* Three schools reported different programs separately.

having the programs reported evidence of benefit to students. The number of schools presenting various types of such evidence was tabulated.

Source of Evidence	Number of Schools Reporting
Student Comments	7
Test results	3
A study of the program	5
Grade point average increase	9
Student retention in college	8

Twenty-one schools replied that they saw no evidence of benefit, with three of these qualifying this with the comment, "as yet," indicating a recently begun program. On three questionnaires the question was not answered. These results are for the most part inconclusive, though retention in college and increased grade points provide at least some positive evidence. It should be recalled at this point that a number of these programs were relatively new, and that neither an effective operation nor the resources to judge program results may have existed in such programs. One reply specifically referred to increased retention and raised grade point average of Mexican - American students. Questionnaire replies indicated that at least three masters theses had been devoted to study of such program.

3.1 Criteria Used in Evaluating Reading Ability of Students Entering the Programs

Directors were asked to name the pre-test or means used to determine reading ability of students upon entrance to the program. Of the fifty-five institutions from which replies were received, four stated that no pre-tests were used, and one failed to respond. Six other institutions said they used pre-tests but failed to specify which ones. This left forty-four institutions which gave the names of specific tests utilized. The frequency with which given tests were used is indicated in the table below.

Name of Test	Number of Institutions Using It
Nelson - Denny Reading Test	19
Trieg Diagnostic Reading Test	16
Iowa Reading Test	3
SRA Reading Test	3
Cooperative English Test	2
California Reading Test	2
"Tactics in Reading" McGraw - Hill	2
Perception Development Laboratory Pretests	2
Cloze type locally constructed tests	2

In addition, the following tests received one mention each: Basic Reading Rate Scale, Gilberts Test of Silent Reading, Inglis Vocabulary, College Reading Test, Reading Versatility Test (EDL), Word Clues Placement Test, Burnett Survey, Keystone Vision Test, Wrenn's Study Habits Inventory, Brown-Carlson Listening Test, and the Davis Test.

The above figures indicate that two tests were far and away the most commonly used, that a very large number of other tests were used, at only one or two schools. Some schools obviously used more than one test since the forty-four schools listed sixty-four tests.

In one case a complete battery of tests is given. In another institution, Psychological Services administers the Nelson-Denny Test but the results are not made available for use in the reading program.

4.1 Goals of Programs

The questionnaire gave program directors an opportunity to rank program goals in order of importance.

Goal	Number of replies ranking goals in order of importance.						Total rankings
Ranks	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Comprehension	25	21	9	-	-	-	55
Study Skills	22	16	12	5	5	-	60
Vocabulary Development	8	12	26	9	1	-	56
Speed	8	7	5	28	6	-	54
Critical Reading	1	1	-	2	1	-	5
Attitudes & Recreational	1	-	-	-	--	-	1
Reading Listening Skills	-	-	-	2	-	-	2
Punctuation	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Ability to Write	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Test Taking	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Eyetracking	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Coping	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
Transfer to NonLaboratory Conditions	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
Counseling	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
Organization of Time & Study	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Memory and Health	-	-	-	-	1	-	1

5.1 Text Materials Utilized

Twenty-seven of the fifty-five institutions reported that no regular textbook was required for the course. The texts receiving more than one specific mention were these:

Miller	Increasing Reading Efficiency	4
Jacobus	Improving College Reading	2
Smith	Learning to Learn	2
Gilbert	Breaking the Reading Barrier	2
Brown	Efficient Reading	2
	Word Power Made Easy	2
Pauk	How to Study in College	2
Spargo	Voices From the Bottom	2

Eighteen other textbooks received one mention each.

It is apparent that in the majority of cases, reliance upon a textbook was not a major feature of the course.

5.2 Teaching Materials (other than standard textbooks) Found to Be Most Useful.

The use of "boxed" materials was reported frequently. These materials were predominantly produced by Science Research Associates (SRA). Of these, the following breakdown shows the level of the kit and the number of institutions reporting their use:

Reading for Understanding (RFU)	Number
Senior	25
Junior	11
SRA Reading Kits	
Lab III	12
Lab IV	16
Lab College	16

The researchers asked about these levels rather specifically because they felt that responses would give clues as to the general reading proficiencies of students entering such courses.

Educational Development Laboratory Materials.

Filmstrips	21 (indicate speed emphasis
Word Clues	12 (vocabulary emphasis

The fact that twenty-one of the institutions reported the use of the filmstrips for the controlled reader suggests that increasing the speed of reading easy narrative materials - (while emphasizing comprehension) is viewed as a desirable goal in a sizable number of these programs.

Workbook type material were also popular. Of those mentioned specifically Miller's Increasing Reading Efficiency was reported in use in eighteen of the programs, while Baker's Reading Skills was mentioned specifically three times. However, one surprising response was that in thirty-one programs teacher-made materials were utilized. This is worthy of noting, since it probably indicates, first, that commercial materials do not meet the wide range of needs evidenced by students in college reading improvement courses, and, secondly, that teachers of such courses are attempting to meet the needs of students by developing their own materials.

Some evidence of the use of "technological equipment" was also noted. One program reported $40,000 worth of such equipment available; while the Language Master, Craig Reading Machine, the use of tapes and speed reading films all received a mention.

6.1 Features of Programs

A stated purpose of this investigation was to ask directors to identify the strength of the reading improvement courses with which they were associated.

Features viewed as strongest by respondents are listed as follows:

Facilities	
Physical facilities	2
Class size	3
Counseling Resources	3
Staff	
Staff performances	7
Rapport	1
Students' Responses	
Voluntary participation	1
Feedback from students	3
Self-image enhancement	2
Improved motivation for self-help	1
Methods, Techniques, Materials	
Individualization	18
Flexibility	3
Wide range of program	1
Study Skill Development Component	3
Development of (8) Specific Skills	1
Students Taught to Read Their Textbooks	11
Diagnostic Testing	2
Evaluation	3
Long-term Results	
Student Achievement	9
Free reading	1
Holding power to advanced courses	1
Coordination with Library	1

Miscellaneous

No cost to student and community 1

It is evident that the largest number of mentions regarding the strength of the program was in the area of individualization and flexibility. Since students were usually pretested and placed in the program on the basis of either normative or "felt" needs, this result was to be expected. It probably reveals the emphasis given by instructors as much as it reveals results obtained. Since this was an open-ended questionnaire item, there was much diversity in the responses, and these responses generally indicate an awareness of specific needs of students and an attempt to meet these needs to a greater extent than one might find in many college classes.

6.2 Areas Considered to Need Improvement

The respondents were also asked to identify the weaknesses of the reading improvement course with which they were associated. A listing of these features follows:

1. Be able to give credit or more credit	14
2. Allow more students into program	4
3. Longer period of study - either a full year or until tested out	2
4. Films available	1
5. More sections	1
6. More and better prepared staff	6
7. More individualization	7
8. Open additional labs	5
9. Make course required for some students	1
10. Make it an individual course separate from remedial English	1
11. More audio activities	1
12. Additional equipment	2
13. Improve physical facilities	4
14. Abandon fee arrangement	1
15. Modulization of information	1
16. Computerization	1

6.3 Types of Activities Contributing Most to Program

The respondents were also asked to list the types of activities which they felt contributed most to the success of their programs. Their responses follow:

Mechanical devices for speed (Including pacers, controlled readers, films, timed exercises, Craig readers, etc.)	23
Programmed material	2
Workbooks	2
Textbooks	25
Required Use of SQ_3R	5
Study Skills	3
Main Ideas	6
RFU	2

Vocabulary Skills	3
Organization and style of text	2
Use of Student's own text	3
How to Take Tests	1
Interaction with Teachers	7
Counseling	5
Diagnostic Results	2
Writing Practice Exercises	1
Initial "success" - "tone for program"	1
Contract plan	1
Media Center	1

Two significant trends emerge; (1) dependence upon mechanical devices to individualize and motivate, and (2) use of textbooks and other materials emphasizing the study skill component.

6.4 Characteristics of Students Entering Program

An open-ended question regarding the characteristics of students elicited opinions from directors that students entering the class tended to be highly motivated, but frequently lacked self-confidence. During the course of instruction the director observed a willingness to work hard, increasing confidence in the student's own ability, a willingness to admit problems and to follow recommendations.

While the comments listed by the respondents were of a positive nature they were not very conclusive.

6.5 Competency Levels of Students Entering Program

A question aimed at discovering the competency levels of entering students in such courses asked for a breakdown of the students in terms of the percentile scores earned on a standardized achievement test. It is worth noting that only 18 respondents provided information for this item.

Percentile Score Range on Achievement Test	Programs Reporting Students in Stated Range (18 Possible)
0 - 5	15
6 - 10	17
11 - 20	18
21 - 30	18
31 - 40	18
41 - 50	17
51 +	3

This seems to be a clear indication that the 18 institutions responding to this item, serve students who might otherwise lack the necessary skills for survival in college.

Regarding the institutions which did not reply to the item, it is safe to surmise that records are not systematically kept to make a response possible. This in itself helps to give some clue as to the vagueness of diagnostic proceedings in many programs.

E. Summary of Findings

Since an open-ended questionnaire was utilized in the survey, data is not easily summarized. Certain trends, however, do seem to be indicated.

1. The survey indicated that the majority of students attending a four-year public degree-granting institution in the geographic areas included in the study have the opportunity if not the requirement, to participate in a reading improvement course.

   A survey of the respondent institutions and a consideration of their size leads the investigators to conclude that they sampled institutions serving at least eighty percent of the students attending public colleges in the geographical area under consideration.

2. The survey indicated that a trend toward granting credit for reading courses is underway. Furthermore, from those institutions not at present granting credit, the replies clearly show a desire to move to credit status.

3. Indications from the directors of such programs suggest that these programs will probably expand in the immediate future.

4. A need for additional physical and instructional facilities was noted in many instances.

5. The instructors of such courses are generally aware of and are attempting to meet the individual specific needs of their students.

6. A number of institutions report evidence (of varying types) that such courses do aid in the retention of their students.

7. There is evidence of considerable attention to the study-skills component of these programs.

8. For the most part, such courses follow the college calendar, with a few institutions reporting a more flexible organization pattern.

9. "Individualization" seems to be gained by using mechanical devices, boxed or programmed materials.

10. A lack of sophistication in reading diagnosis is more than likely in view of the academic preparation of some of the instructors. While recognizing that reading expertise alone can not guarantee the students in such a course the support, personal guidance, and individual attention described, the investigators noted that the evaluation of student's reading competencies was based on the results of standardized achievement tests rather than upon diagnostic instrument tests. Achievement tests, unless utilized in special ways, yield very limited information as to the specific reading skills needing practice. Persons having little expertise in reading diagnosis would have difficulty in precisely identifying specific reading needs of students.

11. The investigators noted considerable uncertainty about where such programs should be housed. This is important since where a program is housed often determines the type and level of training of the instructional staff of the program.

F. Possible Implications

The investigators noted that several institutions reported a promising trend of working with students in the reading courses until a prescribed level of competency was achieved. In view of the desire of colleges to maintain both students and instructional standards, this practice could be very useful in helping previously marginal students achieve a level of academic competency which merits their retention in college. Conversely, it might help some students make a wise decision to discontinue college.

Because of the diversity of entering students' competencies, materials and philosophy of the course academic preparation of instructional staff, housing and physical facilities for the program, it would appear that relatively new or expanding programs might do well to examine several well-established programs which have evidenced some degree of success in holding power and increased grade points. These programs could serve as models which when modified to meet specific institutional needs would give the directors of reading improvement courses several viable options from which to choose.